

Department of Veterans Affairs

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is made of a previously assigned diagnosis or etiology must be kept in mind. The aim should be the reconciliation and continuance of the diagnosis or etiology upon which service connection for the disability had been granted. The relevant principle enunciated in § 4.125, entitled "Diagnosis of mental disorders," should have careful attention in this connection. When any change in evaluation is to be made, the rating agency should assure itself that there has been an actual change in the conditions, for better or worse, and not merely a difference in thoroughness of the examination or in use of descriptive terms. This will not, of course, preclude the correction of erroneous ratings, nor will it preclude assignment of a rating in conformity with § 4.7.

[29 FR 6718, May 22, 1964, as amended at 61 FR 52700, Oct. 8, 1996]

§ 4.14 Avoidance of pyramiding.

The evaluation of the same disability under various diagnoses is to be avoided. Disability from injuries to the muscles, nerves, and joints of an extremity may overlap to a great extent, so that special rules are included in the appropriate bodily system for their evaluation. Dyspnea, tachycardia, nervousness, fatigability, etc., may result from many causes; some may be service connected, others, not. Both the use of manifestations not resulting from service-connected disease or injury in establishing the service-connected evaluation, and the evaluation of the same manifestation under different diagnoses are to be avoided.

§ 4.15 Total disability ratings.

The ability to overcome the handicap of disability varies widely among individuals. The rating, however, is based primarily upon the average impairment in earning capacity, that is, upon the economic or industrial handicap which must be overcome and not from individual success in overcoming it. However, full consideration must be given to unusual physical or mental effects in individual cases, to peculiar effects of occupational activities, to defects in physical or mental endowment preventing the usual amount of success in overcoming the handicap of disability and to the effect of combina-

tions of disability. Total disability will be considered to exist when there is present any impairment of mind or body which is sufficient to render it impossible for the average person to follow a substantially gainful occupation; *Provided*, That permanent total disability shall be taken to exist when the impairment is reasonably certain to continue throughout the life of the disabled person. The following will be considered to be permanent total disability: the permanent loss of the use of both hands, or of both feet, or of one hand and one foot, or of the sight of both eyes, or becoming permanently helpless or permanently bedridden. Other total disability ratings are scheduled in the various bodily systems of this schedule.

§ 4.16 Total disability ratings for compensation based on unemployability of the individual.

(a) Total disability ratings for compensation may be assigned, where the schedular rating is less than total, when the disabled person is, in the judgment of the rating agency, unable to secure or follow a substantially gainful occupation as a result of service-connected disabilities: *Provided* That, if there is only one such disability, this disability shall be ratable at 60 percent or more, and that, if there are two or more disabilities, there shall be at least one disability ratable at 40 percent or more, and sufficient additional disability to bring the combined rating to 70 percent or more. For the above purpose of one 60 percent disability, or one 40 percent disability in combination, the following will be considered as one disability: (1) Disabilities of one or both upper extremities, or of one or both lower extremities, including the bilateral factor, if applicable, (2) disabilities resulting from common etiology or a single accident, (3) disabilities affecting a single body system, e.g. orthopedic, digestive, respiratory, cardiovascular-renal, neuropsychiatric, (4) multiple injuries incurred in action, or (5) multiple disabilities incurred as a prisoner of war. It is provided further that the existence or degree of nonservice-connected disabilities or previous

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unemployability status will be disregarded where the percentages referred to in this paragraph for the service-connected disability or disabilities are met and in the judgment of the rating agency such service-connected disabilities render the veteran unemployable. Marginal employment shall not be considered substantially gainful employment. For purposes of this section, marginal employment generally shall be deemed to exist when a veteran's earned annual income does not exceed the amount established by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, as the poverty threshold for one person. Marginal employment may also be held to exist, on a facts found basis (includes but is not limited to employment in a protected environment such as a family business or sheltered workshop), when earned annual income exceeds the poverty threshold. Consideration shall be given in all claims to the nature of the employment and the reason for termination.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501)

(b) It is the established policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs that all veterans who are unable to secure and follow a substantially gainful occupation by reason of service-connected disabilities shall be rated totally disabled. Therefore, rating boards should submit to the Director, Compensation and Pension Service, for extra-schedular consideration all cases of veterans who are unemployable by reason of service-connected disabilities, but who fail to meet the percentage standards set forth in paragraph (a) of this section. The rating board will include a full statement as to the veteran's service-connected disabilities, employment history, educational and vocational attainment and all other factors having a bearing on the issue.

[40 FR 42535, Sept. 15, 1975, as amended at 54 FR 4281, Jan. 30, 1989; 55 FR 31580, Aug. 3, 1990; 58 FR 39664, July 26, 1993; 61 FR 52700, Oct. 8, 1996]

§4.17 Total disability ratings for pension based on unemployability and age of the individual.

All veterans who are basically eligible and who are unable to secure and follow a substantially gainful occupa-

tion by reason of disabilities which are likely to be permanent shall be rated as permanently and totally disabled. For the purpose of pension, the permanence of the percentage requirements of §4.16 is a requisite. When the percentage requirements are met, and the disabilities involved are of a permanent nature, a rating of permanent and total disability will be assigned if the veteran is found to be unable to secure and follow substantially gainful employment by reason of such disability. Prior employment or unemployment status is immaterial if in the judgment of the rating board the veteran's disabilities render him or her unemployable. In making such determinations, the following guidelines will be used:

(a) Marginal employment, for example, as a self-employed farmer or other person, while employed in his or her own business, or at odd jobs or while employed at less than half the usual remuneration will not be considered incompatible with a determination of unemployability, if the restriction, as to securing or retaining better employment, is due to disability.

(b) Claims of all veterans who fail to meet the percentage standards but who meet the basic entitlement criteria and are unemployable, will be referred by the rating board to the Adjudication Officer under §3.321(b)(2) of this chapter.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 1155; 38 U.S.C. 3102)

[43 FR 45348, Oct. 2, 1978, as amended at 56 FR 57985, Nov. 15, 1991]

§4.17a Misconduct etiology.

A permanent and total disability rating under the provisions of §§4.15, 4.16 and 4.17 will not be precluded by reason of the coexistence of misconduct disability when:

(a) A veteran, regardless of employment status, also has innocently acquired 100 percent disability, or

(b) Where unemployable, the veteran has other disabilities innocently acquired which meet the percentage requirements of §§4.16 and 4.17 and would render, in the judgment of the rating agency, the average person unable to